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SUBJECT: INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR AFGHANISTAN'S NASCENT
TOURISM INDUSTRY: PROGRESS BUT LONG ROAD AHEAD

REF: KABUL 1391

1. (U) SUMMARY: The Aga Khan Foundation's tourism project in Bamyan is making steady progress towards realization of the province's tourism potential. The project has completed nearly 70 initiatives including the opening of a tourism center and production of an annual three-day Silk Road Festival. The majority of visitors to Afghanistan's most important tourist area have so far been Afghans, but a modest number of foreigners have contributed to provincial tourism sector revenues, predicted to reach US\$300,000 in 2009. Despite good progress, Bamyan's ability to realize its full tourism potential in the near term is hindered by road and air access to the province, poor basic infrastructure, and, according to Governor Sarobi, chronic discrimination from Kabul. USG funding of NGOs has played a critical role, especially in the establishment earlier this year of Band-e-Amir as Afghanistan's first national park. The Bamyan Provincial Reconstruction Team has funded road improvement expected to cut travel time from Kabul by 50 percent. The ultimate validation of the province's success as a tourist destination may be the return of both Afghan and regional tourists to Bamyan. END SUMMARY

NGO Aga Khan Leading the Tourism Charge

2. (U) Recently, the Aga Khan Foundation chaired a two-hour meeting on tourism in which Governor Sarobi and representatives from the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), and several ministries participated. Through its tourism initiative (largely funded by the New Zealand aid agency, NZAID), Aga Khan has become the driving force behind building and growing Bamyan's nascent tourism industry. Starting with the establishment of an Ecotourism Office in late 2008, the project has been busy, completing nearly 70 activities ranging from intensive training courses that have trained dozens of guides and marketing activities to study trips and staging first three-day Silk Road Festival, planned to be held in June each year. The project intends to time the launch of its website (www.bamyantourism) with the natf 7,000 beautifully-made Bamyan tourism brochures (developed with the assistance of USAID and the Wildlife Conservation Society and currently being printed in Pakistan). The project is also in the initial stages of building a visitor database.

3. (U) While Aga Khan's Eco-Tourism Program has become the main focal point for developing Bamyan's tourism potential, USG efforts have also been instrumental. USAID has supported three NGOs, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the environmental consulting company ECODIT, and the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development, each of which has worked to establish Band-e-Amir as

Afghanistan's first national park. WCS developed the park's management plan and is currently negotiating revenue benefit sharing options with several GIROA ministries. WCS is also working toward the establishment of two protected areas, one in Bamyan,s Aja Valley (the former royal hunting grounds) and the other in Badakshan Province, and has submitted a new 5-year plan concept note to USAID.

Low Numbers, But Promising Growth

4.(U) Aga Khan representatives reported that 1,750 visitors purchased tickets to see the site of the former Bamyan Buddhas in 2008 of which 950 were Afghans and 800 were foreigners. This year, 1,709 (1,155 Afghans, 554 foreigners) tickets have been sold. With three months remaining in the year, the total number of visitors should easily exceed 2008 figures. In 2008, the three main hotels reported a combined total of 1,050 guests. In the five-month period between April and August of this year, these establishments reported 770 guests. Estimates predict that the two biggest hotels - Silk Road Hotel and Rooftop of Bamyan - will earn a combined \$100K in revenues in 2009. Province-wide revenue estimates for tourism in 2009 are US\$300,000. The goal for 2010 is US\$500,000.

Main Challenges

5.(U) While the Aga Khan project, in coordination with provincial government authorities, is making steady progress creating a solid basis for tourism, several challenges

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remain. Not surprisingly, poor infrastructure remains the primary problem. Today, there is no commercial airline service to Bamyan and the provincial authorities' seeming inability to secure the runway from foot, vehicle, and animal traffic leaves the province teetering on the edge of losing even aid agency and USG flights. There is also an on-going land dispute between the government and four villages which have reportedly never been compensated for expropriated land and threaten to cut down fences erected around the airport's perimeter. By road, potential tourists face a daunting 7-8 hour car ride from Kabul along difficult and, in some parts, dangerous roads. CERP-funded work is under way along a 16km section of road from Bamyan to a point 8km inside Parwan. A request for additional CERP funds has been made for two other sections of the road totaling 29km. The Italians are responsible for the last 15km of road into Bamyan city, but no work is yet underway on this section.

16. (SBU) In addition to these access issues, the province suffers from a severe lack of general tourism infrastructure and services - hotel space, a reasonable selection of dining options, and transportation services. Although strides have been made in training, marketing, and preparing for tourism, Bayman Governor Habiba Sarobi remains frustrated. She told a senior Mission delegation visiting on September 26 that tourism development is her number one priority for the province. She has also accused the central government of discriminating against the Hazaran people, claiming that their efforts are stifled or rejected by central government authorities in Kabul. She cited one recent incident involving Band-e-Amir National Park in which, despite having reached agreement with local residents to build a campsite area and guest houses, the Ministry of Agriculture in Kabul wrote a harsh letter to Governor Sarobi forbidding the project from moving forward.

Recent Successes Highlight Potential

17. (U) Bamyan's success in tourist development will ultimately require the support and participation of a broad base of stakeholders. An excellent example of the power of

such collaboration is the recent success of the province's week-long celebration of Peace Day. Successful implementation of the over 20 public activities required the participation and cooperation of the Eco-Tourism Program, UNAMA, UNEP, the Governor's office, youth groups, the PRT, and several other local organizations. The week's main event) a 12-mile Peace Trek on September 25) saw the participation of over 250 people, including approximately 40 visitors representing nearly a dozen different international organizations, dozens of children and teens, and a large contingent of men and women from the local communities where the event was staged. The following evening, Governor Sarobi and the Eco-tourism office, with significant behind-the-scenes support from the PRT, hosted a cultural evening to celebrate traditional music, dance, handicrafts, and food. There were approximately 80 people in attendance including the Deputy Minister of Information and Culture, the Belgian Ambassador, senior USAID officials, a Japanese Embassy representative, CJTF and TF Cyclone Senior Civilian Representatives, TF Cyclone,s Commanding General, journalists, and representatives from UN agencies and NGOs. During the event, Governor Sarobi emphasized the importance of tourism to Bamyan,s future development and underscored the importance of national and international collaboration to make this dream come true.

Comment

18. (U) While the ultimate validation of Bamyan's success as a tourist destination may be perceived as the number of Western tourists who visit the province, of much greater importance -- and a true measure of success -- is the return of both Afghan and regional tourists to Bamyan. While the number of paying visitors to the Buddhas site is still small, over 20,000 people visited Band-e-Amir lakes last year, the vast majority of them Afghans. Of the 5,000-plus visitors to the three-day Silk Road Festival held in June, nearly all were Afghans. Without USAID,s funding support, it unlikely that efforts to establish the Band-e-Amir National Park would have succeeded.

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